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AUTHOR	Weiner, Stephen S.
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ABSTRACT

Educational voucher plans envision the creation of diverse educational options among which informed parents may make a choice for the schooling of their children. One specific voucher plan--the "regulated, compensatory voucher" plan advocated by the Center for the Study of Public Policy (the CSPP model)--has given rise to a federal effort to create and evaluate local school district demonstrations of a voucher concept. Only one demonstration is under way at this time--the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District (K-8) in San Jose, California, which began a "transition model" voucher demonstration in September 1972. Essentially a summary of some of the major implementation problems encountered in the OEO-Alum Rock demonstration, this paper examines briefly the degree to which the Alum Rock demonstration departs from the model espoused by the Office of Economic Opportunity. Examined are two major sources of modification of the CSPP model--the process of negotiation between OEO and the Alum Rock District which led to the initiation of the Alum Rock demonstration and the process of implementation within the District itself. The Alum Rock demonstration was initially conceived as a voucher experiment designed to empower parents. In operation, however, it has turned into a project involving a substantial decentralization of authority, coupled with a limited form of open enrollment, that has largely served to empower teachers. (Author)

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IMPLEMENTING THE "VOUCHER" DEMONSTRATION IN ALUM ROCK

OR

"TAKING THE *OUCH* OUT OF VOUCHERS"

Stephen S. Weiner

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*The author served as Site Director for the Rand evaluation of the Alum Rock "voucher" demonstration from July 1972 to September 1973. He is currently on the faculty of the Graduate School of Education, Stanford University. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent those of The Rand Corporation.

INTRODUCTION

Educational voucher plans envision the creation of diverse educational options among which informed parents may make a choice for the schooling of their children.

One specific voucher plan--the "regulated, compensatory voucher" plan advocated by the Center for the Study of Public Policy (the CSPP model)--has given rise to a federal effort to create and evaluate local school district demonstrations of a voucher concept.[1] Only one demonstration is under way at this time--the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District (K-8th grade) in San Jose, California, began a "transition model" voucher demonstration in September 1972.

This paper briefly examines the degree to which the Alum Rock demonstration departs from the "regulated, compensatory" model espoused by the Office of Economic Opportunity.[2] As such, this paper is essentially a summary of some of the major implementation problems encountered in the OEO-Alum Rock demonstration.

We examine two major sources of modification of the CSPP model. The first is the process of negotiation between OEO and the Alum Rock District which led to the initiation of the Alum Rock demonstration. The second is the process of implementation within the District itself.

OEO-DISTRICT NEGOTIATIONS

The negotiations between the OEO and the Alum Rock School District lasted for approximately one year--from early 1971 to the spring of 1972. These negotiations led to an agreement, in April 1972, to create a "transitional voucher model." This transitional voucher model differed from the CSPP model in several vital respects:

1. The CSPP model provided for a demonstration in which both public and private schools could participate. The Alum Rock model provided only for the participation of existing public schools within the district.[3] In addition, there was an ambiguous provision in the OEO-District agreement which permitted the entrance of "community-initiated" schools who could qualify for contracts with the Alum Rock school board.

The exclusion of private and parochial schools was due both to provisions of California state law and to some local resistance to the participation of private and parochial schools.

2. Under the CSPP plan, individual schools were not assured economic survival and professional staff members were not guaranteed continuing employment. Under the OEO-District agreement, teachers and central staff members continued to be covered by the District salary schedule. For example, in the case of teachers, this meant that teachers at schools which attracted high parental demand would not receive extra salary and teachers at "unpopular" schools would not suffer a pay cut or the termination of employment. This modification was made to relieve the anxiety and to forestall the opposition of the professional staff.[4]
3. In the CSPP model each school site was to represent a distinct educational alternative. However, Alum Rock parents insisted that their children be given "squatter's rights." That is, the parents insisted on a provision in the demonstration to give enrollment preference to students previously enrolled in the participating schools. In this way, parents who wished their child to continue attendance at a neighborhood school could not be displaced. As a result of "squatter's rights" it became necessary to provide for educational alternatives within each neighborhood school. This was accomplished by requiring each school to form at least two educationally distinct "mini-schools."
4. The CSPP plan provided for an agency (the Educational Voucher Agency, or E.V.A.) totally independent of the participating schools to enforce school eligibility regulations, to redeem parental vouchers, and to collect and disseminate information to parents concerning the performance of voucher schools. The funneling of public school funds through an agency outside of the control of the locally elected school board was barred

> by California law. And it is likely that the District would have resisted the creation of such an agency even if it had been legally permissible. The Alum Rock substitute for the EVA was a voucher staff unit housed in the District's central office and responsible to the District's Superintendent. In addition, a 12-member Educational Voucher Advisory Committee (EVAC), composed of one parent and one school site staff member, was appointed to advise the District's elected Board on policies governing the demonstration.[5]

Thus, responsibility for collecting and disseminating evaluative information for parental use was placed entirely under the jursidiction of the District.

Weak Federal Influence

Each of these four modifications represented a major "retreat" from provisions specified by the CSPP model.

The weak federal influence over the terms and conditions of the demonstration can be traced in part to the predominant local power over schooling which characterizes elementary and secondary education in the United States.

Equally or more important, however, was the fact that after a two-year (1970-72) OEO effort to stimulate a local voucher demonstration, only the Alum Rock District was willing to proceed with even a limited form of vouchers. Thus, Alum Rock had become the "only game in town." Federal voucher officials perceived that if they were unable to produce even a limited test of vouchers, that the anti-voucher forces in Washington would be able to eliminate the funds being used by OEO to promote vouchers.

These factors have meant that the federal role in managing the demonstration has been weak and marginal in comparison to the influence of the District itself.

IMPLEMENTATION IN THE DISTRICT

Voucher theory suggests three characteristics of any demonstration that must exist for an adequate test of voucher concepts:

1. Diversity. Parents must be able to select among a set of schooling options that are truly diverse.
2. Information. If parents are to make an informed choice, then they must have access to information concerning the nature and effectiveness of the various schooling options.
3. Responsiveness. The school system must be responsive to the choices made by parents such that "popular" schools expand to meet parental demand and "unpopular" schools contract or even disappear if they are unable to attract sufficient voucher income to support their operation.

We will examine the impact of implementation in Alum Rock upon each of these characteristics.

Before turning to those questions, however, a general observation concerning implementation is in order.

The District was able to create a version of a substantially modified voucher plan and it did so without serious and disruptive opposition either within the school organization or in the community.

Twenty-two distinct mini-schools at the six participating school sites were created; information concerning the basic features of each mini-school was distributed to the 3,000 participating households; procedures to receive and process parental selections were implemented and virtually all parents had their children enrolled in their first choice mini-school; and the modest amount of busing necessary to transport those children whose parents chose a non-neighborhood school was provided.

Further, in the midst of the demonstration the District succeeded in gaining voter approval of a bond issue and those school board incumbents who stood for reelection, each of whom had supported the demonstration, were returned to office.

Finally, at the end of the first year, the District succeeded in doubling the number of participating schools.

Thus, while the District encountered a number of problems in implementation, the basic elements of the "transition model" were put in place and the District suffered no adverse political consequences as a result of entering into the demonstration.

These "successes" were, in large part, due to these factors:

1. The demonstration brought an additional $1.5 million in federal funds (slightly less than 10 percent of the District budget) to a "poor" school district.
2. The generally supportive posture toward the demonstration on the part of the major teacher organizations.
3. The pre-existing movement toward administrative decentralization in the District.
4. The political and managerial skills of the Superintendent who had been the major actor in promoting the Alum Rock demonstration.

Diversity of Educational Offerings

The twenty-two mini-schools were created by principals and teachers at each school with no participation by central office staff and very little participation on the part of parents.

In the main, these alternatives represented ideas already in the minds of teachers or the expansion of pre-existing instructional innovations in the District.

These mini-schools vary to some extent with regard to the degree of individualization of instruction and the emphasis on certain subject matters (for example, one mini-school emphasized "fine arts" while another mini-school concentrated on math and science). A few mini-schools emphasized "open classroom" techniques.

None of the mini-schools represent a new departure in American education. Rather, they represent a broadening of the highly traditional techniques and curricular emphasis that previously characterized these six schools. The diversity, while real, has been limited. For example, each mini-school continued to devote approximately two-thirds of their time to instruction in reading and mathematics.

The limited extent of diversity in the mini-schools is, in part, attributable to the shortness of the planning time available to teachers and to the absence of outside technical assistance available to teachers.[6]

The diversity of schooling options might have been enhanced if "community-initiated" schools had been organized and admitted to the

demonstration by the school board. Only one significant effort in this regard, organized by unemployed teachers living outside of the District, has appeared. This initiative has largely been frustrated by legal and political problems. After more than a year of effort, this externally initiated school may yet join the demonstration, but only under compromised conditions that portend that it will not constitute a dramatically different option.

Parental Information

Parent counseling and internal evaluation[7] staffs were organized as part of the new voucher staff in the District's central office.

Parent counseling and internal evaluation met two different types of problems.

The first can be characterized as problems of ambiguity as to the nature of evaluative data desired by parents and the most effective means to communicate such data to parents. Partial answers to these questions emerged during the first year.

The internal evaluation during the first year concentrated on surveys of parent satisfaction, general information on the characteristics of teachers in each mini-school and data on the use of instructional funds by each mini-school.

The parent counseling effort utilized both professional and paraprofessional counselors to distribute teacher-prepared program descriptions to parents. No use was made of the mass media to communicate such information to parents.

The political problems encountered in parent counseling and evalution were serious. The ability to gather and disseminate information to parents gave the voucher staff substantial potential power to affect the reputation and the fate of participating schools and mini-schools. The six voucher principals succeeded in gaining de facto control over these potentially threatening functions and both the parent counseling and internal evaluation staffs were constrained to function within general guidelines agreeable to the principals and their staffs. One consequence of this control by the participating schools was a decision not to release student test scores until the end of the second year of the demonstration.

Responsiveness

The responsiveness of individual mini-schools to changes in parental demand was affected by physical limitations, the nature of the instructional process, the weakness of economic incentives and the characteristics of mini-schools as social groups.

First, if individual mini-schools were to expand, then additional classrooms and additional common facilities (library, cafeteria, and recreational space) had to be available. It proved to be the case that the individual schools and the District as a whole had only small surpluses of such physical facilities. As a result, trailers often had to be used to provide additional instructional space for expanding mini-schools. The use of trailers was unpalatable to both teachers and administrators.

Second, teachers strongly objected to instability in classroom enrollment. Teachers found it difficult enough to cope with the entrance of new students and the exit of old students that is a consequence of the transient Alum Rock population. Thus, additional classroom instability inherent in unfettered pupul transfer as part of the demonstration's transfer rules became particularly objectionable to some teachers.

Third, the administrative and instructional problems that accompanied mini-school expansion was not assuaged by granting extra pay to the teachers so affected. While it is true that additional student enrollment brought additional funds that could be used for materials, aides, and field trips, teachers apparently found that such additional funds became of rapidly decreasing marginal utility. Indeed, during the first year, teachers left unspent approximately 25 percent of the discretionary funds granted to them as part of the demonstration.

Finally, expansion of mini-schools required admitting additional teachers into the mini-school faculty. Many of the mini-schools had originally been formed by teachers who had a personal affinity for one another. In some cases, the prospect of adding new people to an already stable and well-knit team of teachers within a given mini-school was greeted unenthusiastically by the existing teachers.

As a result of these factors, the Alum Rock demonstration is not highly responsive to shifts in parental demand. During the first year most of the mini-schools were closed to further enrollment most of the time. And the rules for parental choice have been modified to permit teachers to place enrollment limits on the size of their mini-schools.

The case should not be overstated. The mini-schools did evince some diversity; parents did receive information, including some of an evaluative nature; some mini-schools did change in size as a result of changes in parental demand. But the constraints operating in each area were substantial and persistent.

CONCLUSION

The result of federal-local negotiations and the implementation process within the Alum Rock District is a "voucher demonstration" which markedly departs from the type of free market for schooling prescribed by voucher models. Indeed, it is not at all clear that it is accurate or useful to describe the Alum Rock model as a voucher demonstration.

But whether the Alum Rock demonstration can properly be termed a voucher model or not, it may nevertheless constitute an interesting example of an intervention in the public schools.

In particular, the creation and functioning of the mini-schools should receive particular attention.

Let me specify two intriguing consequences of the mini-school organization.

First, as a result of the size of the mini-school staffs and the age range of students enrolled, 85 of the 126 classrooms in the demonstration had a combination of grade levels. Because of the age range in these classrooms, teachers were often forced to turn to some form of individualized instruction. Fifteen of the 22 mini-schools exhibited high or medium degrees of individualization with individual or small group instruction being more common than instruction directed to the whole class.

Second, the formation of small groups of teachers who were jointly responsible for planning and implementing an instructional program led

to cooperative teacher planning, the sharing of ideas and an increased sense of teacher responsibility to their own peer group. With approximately $500,000 in discretionary funds available to the mini-schools, the Alum Rock demonstration has led to a substantial decentralization of fiscal and curricular authority to the mini-school level.[8]

In some cases, the decentralization of authority has caused teachers to view their jobs with renewed enthusiasm.

The Alum Rock demonstration was initially conceived as a voucher experiment designed to empower parents. In operation, however, it has turned into a project involving a substantial decentralization of authority, coupled with a limited form of open enrollment, that has largely served to empower teachers.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Education Vouchers, A Preliminary Report on Financing Education by Payment to Parents, Center for the Study of Public Policy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, March 1970.

2. From 1969 to 1973 the Educational Voucher program was a part of the Office of Economic Opportunity. As a consequence of the reorganization of the Office of Economic Opportunity, the management of the education voucher program is now under the jurisdiction of the National Institute of Education (NIE). NIE is currently seeking to create additional voucher demonstrations whose rules will differ from the Alum Rock model.

   The data upon which this paper is based were collected through extensive personal interviews and non-participant observation in the Alum Rock School District as part of the Rand Corporation's evaluation of the Alum Rock demonstration.

3. The participation of individual schools was voluntary and was subject to the consent of the principal and teaching staff of each school. During the 1972-73 school year, 6 of the 24 schools in the District chose to participate. In the 1973-74 school year, 13 schools are participating.

4. It should be noted that Alum Rock was unique in that, alone among the Districts in which voucher feasibility studies had been funded, neither the local NEA nor the AFT affiliate opposed participation in the voucher demonstration.

5. Collective parent participation in the governance of the demonstration is not an element of the CSPP model inasmuch as that model assumes that the operation of the "educational marketplace" will assure adequate responsiveness to parental desires.

   Efforts to provide for a parental advisory role in the demonstration arose from three factors:

   a. A long-standing policy of the OEO to promote "maximum feasible participation" of poor people in OEO-funded programs.

   b. The fact that the Alum Rock demonstration did not involve competition among independent educational agencies but rather limited competition within one educational organization. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to encourage parental input into the District policies that would govern the demonstration.

c. A pre-existing trend within the District to provide for parental input through formally organized advisory committees both at the central office and school site levels.

The record of the first year regarding parental participation is clear. Neither the EVAC nor the companion school-site parent advisory committees played an important role in shaping demonstration-wide policies or in formulating curriculum at the mini-school level.

6. Salesmen for educational publishers, attracted by the discretionary funds available to teachers, constituted the major external source of new ideas and materials.

7. There were two evaluation efforts funded by the federal government. The "external" evaluation, conducted by The Rand Corporation, was independent of the District, and reports its findings to the federal government, not to the District. The "internal" evaluation, under the control of the District, is responsible for reporting information to the District and parents.

8. These discretionary funds come entirely from the federal grant. When federal support is terminated, the amount of money that will be under direct teacher control will drop drastically unless other outside funding is found or the District devises a means of diverting some portion of the current District budget into accounts under mini-school control.